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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 000425

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PREL BG

SUBJECT: BANGLADESH STRIKE WINDS DOWN

REF: A. DHAKA 0360

1B. DHAKA 0361

Classified By: P/E Counselor D.C. McCullough, Reason(s): 1.5 (b),(d)

11. (C) Summary: The 60-hour strike called to protest the January 27 grenade attack that killed former Awami League finance minister Kibria is winding down amid reports of scattered violence and injuries. AL MP's are boycotting tonight's delivery of President Ahmed's annual address to Parliament. The AL meets later today with its allies to consider new strikes that might spill into the SAARC summit, which the BDG affirms will open on schedule February 6. Local press highlighted the suspicious transfer of two police officers involved with the attack investigation. End Summary.

Three Days of Sporadic Clashes

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12. (SBU) On January 27, an explosion in Habiganj, 250 kilometers northeast of Dhaka, killed five Awami League (AL) members and wounded at least 70 others. Killed were MP and former Finance Minister Shah A.M.S. Kibria, his nephew Shah Manjurul Huda, and AL activists Saddique Ali, Abdur Rahim, and Abul Hossain (ref a). The AL quickly declared a 60-hour country-wide strike (hartal) that ends at 1800 local January 31.

13. (SBU) As the strike heads into its final hour, sporadic clashes centered in Dhaka have left one person dead and at least a 150 injured. There have been disruptions in inter-city bus, rail and air traffic, and many shops, schools, and businesses were closed in the major cities. In Dhaka, seven vehicles were set on fire, and police used tear gas and batons to stop a procession of AL MP's, reportedly injuring two MP's and two press photographers in the process. In Dhaka and Chittagong, police confined AL activists to party offices in some areas and other locations to prevent them from demonstrating. Police arrested 15 AL leaders in Chittagong, but arrests in general appear to have been few.

14. (SBU) AL MP's are scheduled to march on Parliament at 1500 local.

15. (SBU) At approximately 1530 local, an explosion occurred in the vicinity of the residence of S.Q. Chowdhury, the PMO's Parliamentary Affairs Adviser and an arch-villain for many AL activists. There are no reported injuries.

AL: The BNP/Jamaat Alliance Did It

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16. (SBU) AL president Sheikh Hasina, other party leaders, and Kibria's widow and son quickly blamed the grenade attack on the BDG. "Shah AMS Kibria was killed as part of the BNP/Jamaat-led government's cleansing operation against Awami League to hang on to power. The government high-ups instructed kill Kibria," Hasina declared at her January 28 press conference. On January 29, AL SYG Abdul Jalil broadened the charge to include PM Zia and her son Tariq Rahman. "Kibria's killing is not an isolated incident," he noted. "but a sequel to the killings of Ivy Rahman (at the August 21 attack) and Ahsanullah Master" (the AL MP assassinated in Dhaka on May 7).

17. (C) Saber Hossain Chowdhury, Hasina's political secretary, told us the Kibria hartal has been a "big improvement" in terms of organization and popular response. Demonstrators, he said, are on side streets as well as thoroughfares. Chowdhury predicted a two-day break for remembrance services February 1 and 2 before resuming with a one-day hartal on February 3.

18. (SBU) AL leaders support a two or three day hartal from February 5 that would spill into the formal start of the SAARC summit on February 6. Pre-summit meetings with lower officials begin February 1. The AL's leftist partners, traditionally resistant to hartals because of their unpopularity, are reportedly divided. A joint meeting of the loose opposition partnership is expected to make a decision later today.

BNP: AL is Exploiting Kibria's Death for Political Gain

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**¶9.** (SBU) Mannan Bhuyian, Local Government Minister and BNP SYG, alleged January 30 that the AL is bent on creating a political crisis through false and irresponsible charges of BDG complicity in Kibria's killing. He urged the AL to desist from strikes and cooperate with the bombing investigation. Regarding prior attacks, he said on January 28: "We could not arrest the culprits involved in bomb and grenade attacks. It may be due to our weakness or the administration." Citing this statement, some AL leaders have called for the BDG's resignation.

Mrs. Kibria: Prompt Medical Care Might Have Saved Him

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**¶10.** (SBU) During the Ambassador's January 29 condolence call on the Kibria family, Mrs. Kibria denied BNP SYG Bhuyian's claim that the BDG had offered a helicopter to evacuate her husband after the attack. When Kibria eventually arrived at the Dhaka Combined Military Hospital, where as a former minister he had a right to service, there was an additional delay while staff attempted to locate doctors. In her view, prompt medical care might have saved his life.

Other Developments

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**¶11.** (SBU) Parliament Boycott: To protest the speaker's refusal to postpone for one day President Ahmed's annual address to Parliament, AL MP's are boycotting tonight's session. According to the AL, parliamentary tradition requires adjourning after an obituary message is read for a sitting member.

**¶12.** (C) Investigator Removed: The police officer investigating the January 27 attack and his supervisor have been suspended, according to press reports. Some press reports speculated the suspensions aim to obstruct an effective investigation. A Dhaka police contact upset with the suspension told us the investigator had made a good start interviewing witnesses, but Home Minister of State Babar personally ordered his replacement with a Dhaka-based officer. "The Home Minister does not want the truth known...and this is the same thing that happened after the August 21 attack."

**¶13.** (C) Another Arges Grenade: On January 29, DGFI DG Major General Rumy confirmed to DATT press reports that the grenade on January 27 was an "Arges," the same type used in the August 21 attack. Contrary to Kibria family claims, he said, there was a BDG helicopter available in addition to 2 private helicopters for charter which the Kibrias opted not to use. According to Rumy, the 73-year-old Kibria was sick the day of the attack but was pressured by AL leadership to attend the rally for sake of his nephew, who was conducting the event.

**¶14.** (SBU) EU/UK Response: Local EU missions have been prominent in registering their condemnation and concerns about the attack. UK Foreign Office Minister of State for South Asia Douglas Alexander wrote Foreign Minister Khan after he was unable to reach him by phone. He wrote: "Your government must now give a clear signal that acts of political terrorism are not acceptable nor government sponsored. This will be important to the people of Bangladesh, and the global community who are deeply concerned by the terrorist attacks in Bangladesh over the last year."

**¶15.** (SBU) Request for FBI, Foreign Help: The BDG has asked for help from FBI, Interpol, and Scotland Yard in the January 27 attack. After the August 21 attack, the BDG also requested foreign help, which it then constrained but subsequently cited as proof of the attack's complexity and hence a reason for the failure to solve the case. Mindful of that experience, the British High Commission and we stated that are taking the new request under advisement. Local papers prominently reported Embassy press guidance on the FBI request:

For FBI assistance to be useful, we believe it would be important for the government to establish clear terms of reference and to make other provisions to ensure that FBI consultants are given full access to all relevant evidence and witnesses. If such terms of reference had been established prior to the involvement of foreign consultants in the August 21 attack, their contribution to the investigation might have been more meaningful. In both cases, the August 21 and January 27 attacks, the potential utility of the FBI assistance was greatly undermined when the crime scene was not properly protected from contamination.

Comment

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**¶16.** (C) With three fatal attacks on senior AL leaders in eight months. it is getting increasingly hard to counter Hasina's insistence that someone (in her view, the BDG) is out to destroy her party. There is a discouragingly familiar pattern after such attacks with each side's allegations and

counter-allegations, even including delayed medical treatment for the wounded at Dhaka's most serviceable hospital. Four days after January 27, no BDG official, to our knowledge, has publicly blamed the AL for the attack, though Communications Minister Huda made this charge at a January 29 diplomatic reception. Several BDG officials, however, including Law Minister Ahmed, have attributed the attack to people who seek to portray Bangladesh as a failed state teetering on Islamist revolution--a possible reference to India or the AL. After August 21, it was PM Zia herself who later insinuated that the AL was responsible for the attack.

¶117. (C) The BDG's approach to these incidents has been to tough out the initial adverse reaction from home and abroad as it follows a two-track strategy of promising "to leave no stone unturned" in the investigation, which it has done now with Ambassador and others, and making sure that the police, or any foreign consultants, don't solve the case. One wild card in the current mix is the upcoming SAARC summit, which could embolden the AL to press its agenda more aggressively and correspondingly make the BDG more sensitive to any acts of "lawlessness."

THOMAS